

Mentoring Philosophy

Dr. Karabi Bezboruah

Developing a mentoring philosophy has been one of the most challenging reflective tasks I have undertaken. Perhaps because I never explicitly considered the need to articulate such a philosophy. Mentoring has always felt innate to me. As I reflect on what mentoring means in my professional life, I am reminded of my childhood and the Indian tradition of “gurus” (mentors) and “shishyas” (disciples). In that system, the guidance of a mentor is not merely valued, it is foundational. This cultural context shaped my earliest understanding of mentoring as a relationship built on trust, respect, and mutual commitment.

My mentoring approach is grounded in a desire to serve, support, and cultivate the intellectual and professional growth of my doctoral students. I view mentoring as a sustained relationship that starts with a student expressing interest in our programs and continues well beyond their graduation. This philosophy is informed by my own lived experiences as a student, where I was fortunate to learn from mentors who continue to guide and inspire me. To me, mentoring is an engagement that requires recognizing students’ thought processes, work styles, and personal contexts, while fostering a collaborative and respectful environment for scholarly development. Ultimately, mentoring is a reciprocal relationship in which both mentor and mentee actively participate, the mentor by offering guidance, and the mentee by engaging with and acting upon that guidance.

I have always believed that a mentor is someone who “shows the light,” not someone who dictates the path. My role is not to prescribe choices, but to help students navigate possibilities, think critically, and challenge assumptions. This approach encourages students to take ownership of their decisions and strengthens their confidence as emerging scholars and leaders.

I serve as the Director of the two PhD programs in CAPP – the Public Administration and Public Policy (PAPP) and Urban Planning and Public Policy (UPPP) PhD, a role I have dutifully served since 2020. This position allows me to support both prospective and current doctoral students through pre-admission advising, course planning, curriculum updates, and continuous communication about scholarly opportunities such as publications, conferences, grants, and fellowships. I firmly believe in supporting all students in our doctoral programs, regardless of formal dissertation supervisory roles, right from the time they are admitted to UTA and through graduation and beyond. This role enables me to have a holistic view of the doctoral student progress, from recruitment, admission, and early coursework to comprehensive exams, proposal development, and dissertation defense, allowing me to align individual mentoring with program-level standards and student success infrastructure. Under my direction, both the PhD programs have navigated successful program reviews in 2023 and 2025. I have played a hands-on role in strategic planning, assessment of milestones, and the design of graduate curriculum, ensuring that learning outcomes map clearly onto doctoral competencies and career readiness for student success.

As Director of PhD programs, I also nurture and support our GRAs and GTAs, and I have counseled them when they had self-doubts, supported them when they needed help, and always open to their feedback as well as responsive to their needs. My belief is that if I hired them to assist our programs, then my job is to make sure they succeed and have the resources to be successful. I discuss their work evaluation and provide constructive feedback to improve, and since most of our student assistants are international, they need someone who understands and empathizes with their unique situations.

Since earning tenure in 2015, when I became eligible to supervise dissertations, I have chaired fifteen dissertation committees, with eight successful graduations to date. These graduates have moved into roles that reflect the versatility of our programs, with four holding faculty positions or academic leadership

roles, while others lead in government, nonprofit, education, planning, and health contexts. This underscores my commitment to preparing scholars for impact across sectors and reflects my own diverse educational and cultural background that prepared me to appreciate and acknowledge perspectives of other fields.

Besides supervising, I served on 27 dissertation committees, including one student from Social Work and another currently in Civil Engineering. Collectively, these outcomes demonstrate not only completion rates but the quality and diversity of placements, which is an important yardstick for doctoral mentoring effectiveness. As a chair and committee member, I prioritize topical breadth, engaging dissertations across public policy such as governance, nonprofit leadership, environmental planning, philanthropy, equity, and urban design. This range equips students to address complex public problems with interdisciplinary lenses.

Upon reflecting on my mentor journey, I identify five principles that ground my mentoring practice and contribute to successful mentor–mentee relationships:

1. **Trust in each other’s capabilities:** I trust my mentees to honor their commitments and strive for excellence. In turn, I seek to uphold their trust by providing thoughtful, unbiased guidance, connecting them to opportunities, and supporting their academic journeys. My involvement as the faculty advisor for the CAPPa PhD Consortium, a doctoral student-run organization, has further strengthened this trust, making me a resource not only for my own mentees but for all students across the two doctoral programs. I initiated several professional development programs such as writing groups, peer mentoring, grant writing workshops, mock conference presentations and job talks, alumni lectures, etc., to provide more value and support for our students.
2. **Respect for diverse opinions and thought processes:** My experiences as both a mentee and mentor have shown me the importance of valuing diverse perspectives. My students bring a wide range of lived experiences, including first-generation scholars, students from minority communities, international students, and working professionals. Their backgrounds shape their research interests, approaches, as well as their time commitment to their programs, and I make a conscious effort to honor their perspectives while guiding their scholarly development. This mutual respect enhances our work together.
3. **Alignment of expectations:** Over time, I learned that openly discussing expectations at the outset of the mentoring relationship prevents misunderstandings and strengthens trust. Since our fields often lack the structured research labs common in other disciplines, the faculty–student relationship requires even greater clarity, particularly as students’ progress from coursework to dissertation stages. From their earliest semesters, I support students with the development of term papers, conference proposals, guidance on work-life balance, visibility, and eventually dissertation advising. I encourage them to present at conferences, and I took 3 students from my policy course to our flagship nonprofit research conference (ARNOVA) to present our service-learning project that led to its publication as a journal article.
4. **Willingness to listen and understand:** Patience and listening are vital in understanding students’ needs. By offering a safe space for students to express their concerns and frustrations, I gain insight into their experiences and can better support them. I ask clarifying questions, which helps them refine their ideas and navigate challenges. At the same time, my mentees must be open to feedback and willing to act on guidance. I have an open-door policy, and students can drop by or call me anytime to discuss their issues or questions, which gives them comfort and support knowing that they are being heard. I am also very responsive to current and prospective students’ queries, and I respond to their emails or calls almost immediately, which makes current and prospective students feel comfortable reaching out in their time of need.
5. **Commitment to providing a safe, nonjudgmental space:** A nonjudgmental environment enables intellectual risk-taking. My students know that I will address their ideas and concerns with openness rather than criticism, and so they engage more deeply and candidly with me. This safe environment

supports not only their academic development but also the long-term professional relationship that often extends well beyond graduation.

To strengthen community and peer support, I founded the Doctoral Student Mentorship Program at CAPP, a peer mentoring initiative that pairs advanced doctoral students with new cohorts to provide support and guide the new admits. Students consistently report that this program offers a reliable and affirming space to navigate academic, institutional, and cultural transitions.

A hallmark of my mentoring is research socialization. I routinely mentor and co-author with doctoral students, targeting high-visibility journals and conferences appropriate to their substantive areas. I help to accelerate students' scholarly identity and signal to hiring committees that our graduates are research prolific and publication-ready. I frequently feature doctoral advisees as co-authors and co-presenters at flagship venues in our disciplines. This exposure builds reputational capital, expands professional networks, and gives students constructive feedback from researchers outside of UTA, an essential ingredient for revising manuscripts and sharpening job-market talks. My national service in leadership roles amplifies these opportunities. These serve as gateways for my mentees to access broader mentoring communities and collaborative projects. The outcomes of my approach are visible in my advisees' trajectories. Many of my advisees publish in respected journals prior to graduation, strengthening their scholarly identities and competitiveness on the job market.

Path Forward

My mentoring philosophy is not aspirational prose but a lived practice from admissions to alumni achievements that organizes people, processes, and platforms around student success. My approach is an intentional, student-centered partnership that blends rigorous scholarly training with professional socialization. At the core of my philosophy is a strengths-oriented advising model. I meet students where they are, listen to their ideas, co-design and co-create feasible research plans and professional development goals tailored to each student's aspirations. My approach is inherently responsive to students' needs and acknowledges the diverse intellectual and professional trajectories that today's doctoral students pursue. Through national service and leadership, I connect doctoral students to opportunities and network across professional associations. These commitments are grounded in inclusive pedagogy, structured program leadership, and intentional professionalization that translate directly into student outcomes and leadership roles that advance knowledge and serve the public. Writing this mentoring philosophy has prompted me to reflect on my development as a mentor and the values that guide my practice. I look forward to continuing to grow as a mentor and to supporting our doctoral students as they advance in their scholarly and professional paths.